

Architectural criticism 1950-2000

Theories and history of architecture via the *Collected Writings* of Geert Bekaert

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A. INTRODUCTION

The critical discourse on architecture has, in the modern Western world, never gained the same attention, depth or width as, for example, the discourse on literature or the visual arts. Critical oeuvres in the field of architecture tend, on the one hand, to develop into a journalistic, non-challenging activity without any trace of memory or theory, or, on the other hand, to concentrate into an academic, specialised and only partly 'available,' professional activity. Furthermore: research on the discourse on architecture – that is to say: into the question what it means to write or speak about architecture – has been up to now virtually non-existent.

Nevertheless: examining or 'making' architecture culture, architecture theory and architecture history of the recent past is impossible without a thorough understanding of the ways that have been used to make architecture – probably the mutest of all art

forms – 'understandable,' 'attractive,' 'approachable,' 'profitable' or 'meaningful'.

In my doctoral research I will trace a 'history and a theory of architectural criticism' in the Netherlands in the second half of the 20th century, using the work of critic, historian and theoretician Geert Bekaert (Kortrijk, 1928) as the *casus par excellence*.



Figure 1. Geert Bekaert, Francis Strauven, *Bouwen in België 1945-1970*, Exhibition Catalogue, Nationale Confederatie van het Bouwbedrijf, Brussel, 1971.

B. DIACHRONIC APPROACH

Referring to the Italian historian Manfredo Tafuri's famous remark that architectural criticism should be the 'litmus paper' that indicates the historicity of architecture – the oeuvre of Geert Bekaert can serve as a 'litmus paper' that indicates the value, the criticality and the 'eternity' of every period in the history of ideas concerning architecture since World War II. As well a permanent bystander as a fierce participant, the writings of Bekaert have played (actively) a major role in every modern architectural debate in the Netherlands; and have reflected (passively) on every phase in the recent history of ideas in the Western world.

Parallel to the editing (in cooperation with prof. dr. Mil De Kooning) of the *Collected Writings* of Geert Bekaert (of which, up to now, five volumes have appeared), I am preparing a definitive bibliography of the more than 1200 texts that have been written by Bekaert. This bibliography can help to give access and insight into the evolution of architectural culture – that is (in a bird's-eye view): modernity (50's), 'modern' religious architecture (50's), preservation of monuments and historic buildings (60's), participation versus autonomy (70's), urbanism and the architecture of the city (80's), historicity in contemporary architecture (80's), the rise of architectural culture (90's), 'starchitects' (90's).

C. SYNCHRONIC APPROACH

Next to this historical research, my doctoral thesis will concern itself with more theoretical stances, in concentrating on an evaluation of the important themes that have dominated the discourse on architecture during the last fifty years. Again, the work of Geert Bekaert can serve as a filter to express the recurrent motifs in post-war Western architectural and critical thought. Always the first to deny membership of intellectual elites or to dismiss faith in rigorous schools of thought, Bekaert and his oeuvre can shed light onto the hidden agenda behind most of the – often very temporary – debates, ideas, manifesto's or theories.

This approach will explicitly be synchronic: the important architectural themes, typical to modernity, have hardly changed over the last 150 years. My research will evolve into an inter-related description of these topics and themes, which have played a role in post-war architecture, as well as in the most contemporary practices.

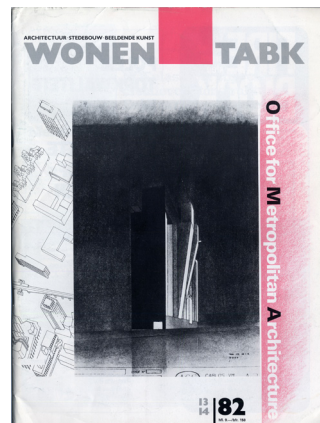


Figure 2. *wonen-TA/BK*, nrs.13-14, special issue on Rem Koolhaas/OMA, 1982.